

BARBARA TOMLINSON AND GEORGE LIPSITZ (2019). *INSUBORDINATE SPACES. IMPROVISATION AND ACCOMPANIMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE.*

A Review by Philipp Schmickl

Barbara Tomlinson's and George Lipsitz' monograph is part of the Temple University's series *Insubordinate Spaces*, also edited by Lipsitz. In this publication, the authors explore issues concerning current social justice movements as well as the academic field. It also includes a chapter on the cultural politics of Latinx/Chicanx¹ musicians and artists in Los Angeles and the southwest of the United States. This will be a central aspect of the review.

Tomlinson/Lipsitz initiate their analyses by recounting stages in the life of the civil rights activist Jerome Smith from New Orleans. He is introduced as a kind of personification of an insubordinate space and thus the title of the first chapter, »Listening to Jerome Smith«, metaphorically sums up the course the authors are going to take: learning from insubordinate spaces. They describe the recurrent crises that have been shaking our world(s) for the last decades due to the imposition of neoliberal market-based logic on every aspect of life, and the subjection and exploitation of people who are considered »not white«. Drawing on a wide range of social justice scholarship amply discussed in the book, the authors argue that it is exactly these dire and subordinating circumstances that have provoked the emergence of insubordinate spaces and currents of resistance. They emphasize that they are not interested in insubordination »[u]nconnected to collective goals of social justice« but in movements that »go beyond simple insubordination to envision and enact new ways of knowing and new ways of being« (7). The illustrations for their theoretical framework refer exclusively to developments in the USA. The descriptions of power relations, however, offer more universal aspects

1 Chicana/Chicano (female/male) designates not only Mexican Americans but also points to their social and cultural activism.

too—similar to Michel Foucault's Collège de France lectures on the history of *gouvernementalité*.²

Tomlinson and Lipsitz are ultimately arguing that insubordinate spaces »are not liberated zones or free spaces ...[nor] utopian places that offer a blueprint for a perfect world« (12) but places where certain techniques of insubordination are used as well as produced. Chapter two, »Concepts for Insubordinate Spaces in Intemperate Times«, examines these »conceptual tools«. The three subsequent chapters deal with »three extraordinary insubordinate spaces« (15): the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement following the incidents in Ferguson, Missouri around the killing of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown in 2014; the Idle No More movement, launched in winter of 2012-2013 by Indigenous people in Canada against the destruction of their land by corporate state capitalism; and the cultural politics of Chicano artist(s) (art activists) in Los Angeles and the American southwest. Each chapter contains an ample characterization and contextualization of the movement as well as an assessment of how the activists apply insubordinate tools and what they achieve by doing so. In portraying the artist(s)-movement, Tomlinson and Lipsitz do not seek to answer the question of whether there are insubordinate spaces in the world of art and music that oppose the subordinating requirements of the business.³ They are more interested in how visual art and musicking⁴ are used as, and for, civic insubordination to resist the hegemony of coloniality and neoliberalism—two central terms the authors identify as strategies of oppression. These are described in chapters six, »Coloniality and Neoliberalism as Knowledge Projects«, and seven, »Accompaniment and the Neoliberal University«, and consist of analyses of the concepts of neoliberalism and coloniality as well as the impediments they pose in college and university research (again with a focus on the US). The authors describe coloniality as the current term or up-to-date version of an educational, political, spatial, and military project that is derived from European colonialism. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is considered an

2 The Collège de France lectures were held between 1970 and 1984. I particularly refer to Michel Foucault (1997). *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au Collège de France. 1976*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard; and to Michel Foucault (2006). *Sicherheit, Territorium, Bevölkerung. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. The latter was held in 1978.

3 At this point I would like to commemorate Christopher »Small's Law of Artistic Production, which states, »If an artist makes a lot of money from his or her work, it is only after a lot of other people have made a lot of money from it first«.
Christopher Small (2016). *The Christopher Small Reader*. Ed. by Robert Walser. Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, p. 190.

4 Cf. *ibid.* and Christopher Small (1998). *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middleton: Wesleyan University Press.

»evolving and morphing conjuncture [that] coalesces around the ideas that the market should be the center of social life, that belligerent and brutal competition will ensure the survival of the fittest, and that self-interest ›frees‹ people from obligations and responsibilities to others« (163). The last chapter, »Carry the Struggle, Live the Victory«, presents a discussion of a social justice scholarship that has learned to incorporate tools of insubordination into research methods and therefore could indeed contribute to resistance and change.

The second part of this review is dedicated to the practices of the activists as well as those inside academia. To close the first section, however, I consider it worthwhile to briefly recapitulate the »Concepts for Insubordinate Spaces in Intemperate Times«. They are practices re/invented through the agency—meaning intention or consciousness of action⁵—of people struggling for social justice and include accompaniment, improvisation, the middle run, »konesans«, and »balans«:

The concept of accompaniment states that »everyone contributes and everyone counts« (29-30). It is outlined along three axes: i) the liberation theology advanced by Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador; ii) a practice in music-making; and iii) »the metaphor of accompaniment as the movement of a community of travelers walking down a road together« (24). Archbishop Romero argued that the economically comfortable had to listen and learn from the poor to determine the best course of the future together. For the musical example, the authors refer to jazz, and they state that to make the music sound good, »[m]usical accompaniment requires attention, communication, and cooperation« (27). Every musician, they state, is therefore responsible for the outcome; visibility and individual virtuosity should move to the background. Accompaniment, however, does not only demand alertness and imagination, but it also requires improvisation; in music as well as in any social and political interaction.

Regrettably, the characterization of improvisation is rather short and lacks depth. Since improvisation is presented as a tool for insubordination, it would be interesting to learn more about the authors' views of it as a subversive practice. For example, and this is a question I am meditating on from time to time: Can improvisation be seen as a technique of the individual to keep a balance between her personal freedom and the (ideological, economic, and religious) constraints that govern her, in both musical and social contexts?

5 Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (2002). *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 595.

The concept of the middle run, seen as the most crucial for social change, is borrowed from Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of the middle-run temporality as well as from Stuart Hall's discussion of Gramsci's mid-level theory. It is described as »patient and practical political and pedagogical work in the mid-range temporality of the next ten to twenty years« (37-38). Decisions and actions for the short run, such as mass protests in the streets, »while necessary are never sufficient« (37).

Finally, in order to guarantee a strong backbone for middle-term efforts of accompaniment and the more spontaneous acts of improvisation, Tomlinson and Lipsitz introduce the notions of »konesans« and »balans« from Haitian Vodou: »Mastery of *konesans* requires that people ... acknowledge *the pull of the past on the present*. ... Ancestral experiences and epistemologies from the past can be part of the present« (40-41). If we imagine a diagram, *konesans* can be seen as a line in a three-dimensional space connecting the past via the present with what might come in the future; at the same time *balans* can be viewed as a line intersecting perpendicularly with this timeline at the position of the individual, or, as we shall see, a certain number of individuals: »*Balans* holds that everyone has a part of the truth«, which also includes antagonistic viewpoints. The art of *balans* consists of reconciling different aspects of the same reality into an encompassing view of the circumstance. In other words, the argument is, that for the creation of insubordinate spaces one has to acknowledge the oppression but at the same time consider »the long legacies of struggle against oppression, of irrepressible attempts at autonomy, self-determination, interdependency, and freedom dreaming« (41-42).⁶

All in all, the theoretical frameworks and the thoroughly researched and immensely informative examples of political movements add up to a very engaging publication. Writing this review for *Samples*—a journal on popular music research—, however, I would like to pay closer attention⁷ to the cultural politics of Latinx/Chicanx artistas-musicians including examples of son jarocho and fandango in Los Angeles as well as the partly stereotype-dissolving hip hop productions by Chingo Bling:

6 For this specific approach to activism the authors use the metaphor of the two mirrors, one reflecting the dire circumstances, the other the long history of struggle (Cf. pp. 41-44).

7 An interesting semantic detail that does not lack symbolism is that in English one says to »pay attention« and in Spanish »prestar atención« which means to *lend* one's attention to someone/something.

A song that comes to mind in this context is Arlo Guthrie's »Coming Into Los Angeles.«⁸ in which he recreates (actualizes) widely spread stereotypes by mixing—or at least juxtaposing—three seemingly dangerous ingredients that accompany his arrival at the Los Angeles Airport: drugs, Mexico, and women. Chingo Bling, in his own music, lyrics, and videos opposes this arbitrary and distorted but prevailing association of Mexico with drugs and drug-trafficking into the US. The appearance of women in his videos, however, has nothing to do with emancipation. Nonetheless, Bling creates a popular space impregnated with humor, in which existing problems are viewed from a different angle—from below. Tomlinson/Lipsitz provide analyses of his songs »Like This and Like That« from the 2007 album *They Can't Deport Us All* (a slogan banding together all immigrants) and »Walk Like Cleto« in order to sustain the rapper's central message: »Don't pay attention to the stereotypes.« (79). In his videos, he addresses the discrepancy between the views of the mainstream (media) and the actual brutal reality of many Mexicans who had to leave their homes and find work in the US to survive. The way the authors analyze Chingo Bling's music using their concept of accompaniment, is not satisfying: Due to his education (86), popularity, and financial success, the rapper has already left the lowest strata of society. In addition to this, as they state in another chapter referring to Staughton Lynd's 2012 book *Accompanying: Pathways to Social Change*, »accompaniment requires physical proximity, not just vicarious identification« (219). Bling's videos rather suggest that he is applying a symbolic form of balans, showing different aspects of the same reality which is a source of his success and (thus) at the same time a potential way of changing the stereotypes in the middle run.

Truly compelling illustrations of—and sources for—the theoretical framework can be found in the sections on son jarocho and fandango, a musical and social activity involving songs and dance. The concept of accompaniment becomes clear when the authors describe, for example, how skilled musicians or dancers accompany beginners, respectively introduce people from other communities to what is going to happen. It also occurs when people who usually do not have a voice (street vendors, for example) prepare the lyrics of a song together. This open climate is presented as an encouragement for people to improvise not only in music or dance but also socially. Tomlinson and Lipsitz stress this spirit of co-creation as vital for the building of new communities composed of members of different communities, to build friendships among people that are divided by the neoliberal and colonial practices of the state. The authors shed light on the qualities of balans in fandango, where

8 Arlo Guthrie (1969). »Coming Into Los Angeles.« In: *Running Down The Road*. Reprise Records, RS 6346.

every participant is part of the same reality in the moment of the experience, as well as on the conscious adoption of *konesans* via an orientation towards their *own* traditions and a remembering of their capacities that were passed on to them by people who might still live in Mexico or further south. In that way, the fandango is »an often neglected archive for sources of resilience and resistance« (78) and is »display[ing] deep respect for ancestral traditions and knowledge but also deep determination to adapt them to contemporary circumstances« (97). The authors undertake further compelling analyses and socio-musicological interpretations, revealing connections between musical and social processes as, for example, in the examination of the song »Planta de los pies« by the band Quetzal⁹ (cf. 106-7).

The introduced concepts of insubordination certainly give access to a place that permits freer thinking. This place does not conceal the problematics of shared realities and points to possible ways of dealing with them in the past and the present, to the left and the right. Of course, concepts cannot keep up with the actual complexities of human life; nevertheless, in this case, they equip the scholar and/or activist with useful prisms to dismantle what is really going on. As far as the concept of the middle run is concerned, it belongs, in my opinion, more to the domain of political activism than to the realm of art. Although it is undeniable that artistic practices can have their effects in the middle run, they primarily are not conceptualized for such, while political movements often are. Tomlinson and Lipsitz do not apply the concepts for insubordinate spaces exclusively to cultural and political movements, they also scrutinize insubordinate spaces within academia:

In two uplifting chapters, they analyze problematic academic practices and customs infused with colonial and neoliberal rationale and provide examples of counter-practices. The authors advocate a social justice scholarship guided by processes of cooperation with the subjects of their study. Scholars should act wisely in learning from their subjects, as well as nourishing an egalitarian dialogue between their subjects' ways of seeing things and academic interpretation. Because »they are forced to fight for survival and dignity, the insubordinate spaces they create function as key sites that reveal to everyone how power actually works, how the world is actually governed« (207). The authors argue that such traditions and practices, especially those coming from insubordinate spaces—providing *different* solutions to the problems that govern our lives—should become a part of academic endeavors. One is tempted to hope that this might lead to a broadening of scholarly perspec-

9 In Quetzal (2003). »Planta de los pies«. In: *Worksongs*. Vanguard, 79738 2.

tives in the middle run and to the liberation of academia from the market-oriented straitjacket in the long run. Even if scholars do not see their research and their output concerning the promotion of social justice, it is important »to know *the work we want our work to do*; to frame scholarly relations not as *competition* but as *accompaniment*; ... to acknowledge that our work speaks for us but also for others; and to recognize the dialogic and dialectical nature of our views of society« (180).

The arguments made in »Insubordinate Spaces« have the potential to turn out to be very fruitful. The examples of cultural politics, musicians, and artists show how a connection between an attitude in art-making can be traced to the social and political attitude of the artist and vice versa. The infusion of artistic practices into daily business and the permeation of this business with artistic thinking is a recurrent motif along with the oscillation of the individual between dealing with one's social surroundings and crafting one's own music/art. Scholars interested in power relations and the social contextualization of their subjects of research will find plenty of examples of how this can be done persuasively. The book can also serve as a point of departure for getting acquainted with social justice scholarship as well as a contemporary history reader on issues of racism in the USA and Canada. The concepts for insubordinate spaces in intemperate times surely broaden the ways of approaching and looking at one's subject, no matter what it is.

Notions like *konesans*, *balans*, and especially *accompaniment* remind us that we could and should listen more to people outside academia who share different kinds of experiences—including those whose views are not ours. Recent developments in the contexts of the corona- and subsequent economic and personal crises show a considerable aggravation of the crises that Tomlinson and Lipsitz refer to at the beginning of their book. The division of people has become even more obvious nowadays. People of all occupations—among them many musicians and artists as well as technicians and others involved in »musicking«—are being pushed down or drawn into situations where they do not have much more left than a will to survive. Who should they (we?) learn from how to survive, if not from people whose daily business is survival and the struggle for change?

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